

The North Point

by Jay Halpern

The north point God Created but left unfinished; for, said He, "Whoever claims to be God, let him come and finish this corner which I have left, and thus all will know that he is God."

Pirke d'Rab. Eliezer, chap. 3

Dramatis Personae:

Yonnondio > a wanderer

Kossabone > a wanderer

King Solomon

Ashmedai

King David

Moses

Hiram Abif

courtiers

(Scene 1: Flashes of guns like thunder and lightning: Yonnondio and Kossabone under spotlight,
horrified, seeking protection)

Kossabone

Find cover, Yonnondio! They're blowing everything up all around us!

Yonnondio

We're done for! Done for! It's the end of the world, Kossabone!

Kossabone

Ha! You think so? Then that would mean God has decided to stop torturing me and I don't have that sort of luck. We'll pull through this, my friend, simply because God wants to keep me for his whipping-boy.

(More explosions: the two men flatten themselves on the ground, covering their heads with their
hands)

Yonnondio

No, Kossabone, you've got it all wrong: we're done for all right -- God will simply continue torturing you in Hell.

Kossabone

Thanks for the heartfelt reassurance. And you, my friend? Where do you expect to end up?

(More explosions)

Yonnondio and Kossabone

O God - God - God - God: O God!

Yonnondio

A horrifying thought, Kossabone: you and I are already dead and in Hell! Maybe we're going nowhere... we're here. This is it... For eternity...

(more explosions)

Kossabone

No, no - not Hell yet... I still have you with me and you are my dearest friend. In Hell I won't have that modicum of joy.

Yonnondio

O my friend, yes... yes, yes, yes... we cannot be in Hell as long as we are together. (Explosions)
It just seems like Hell.

Kossabone

The bastards are firing indiscriminately: I can see their drunken, bloated faces in wide-eyed rapture following the arc of tracers as the rockets are launched. Perhaps they're painting pictures in the night sky, amusing themselves at our expense...

Yonnondio

They have only the vaguest notion where our side's supplies and munitions are hidden. They're probably setting out a pattern of rocket-fire, waiting for a lucky hit.

Kossabone

To profane God's Temple... Look at the destruction... The Holy of Holies... (A series of major explosions)

Yonnondio

Where are the other defenders? Are we the only people left alive on the Mount?

Kossabone

Yonnondio! It's too much for my bowels: I'm going to soil myself... (More explosions. Kossabone clutches his stomach, dropping again to the floor.) O God...!

Yonnondio

Did you...?

Kossabone

(Greatly shamed) ... I did ...

Yonnondio

A prayer then for this devil's land... O Lord...

Kossabone

O Lord...

Yonnondio

You have seen fit to reduce us to our greatest need and extremity...

Kossabone

O Lord...

Yonnondio

You have, in Your infinite wisdom, leveled us with the beast of the field...

Kossabone

O Lord...

Yonnondio

... bringing the magnitude and majesty of Your creation full circle, back to the primordial chaos of the Infinite. (Pauses for a response) Kossabone? Are you dead?

(Explosions)

Kossabone

No such luck... Why? Do I seem dead to you? I have been waiting for death, praying for death, demanding death from our God -- but He seems to have other plans, other forms of humiliation in store for me.. O God, I stink! Kill me now!

(Major explosion, frenzied flashes of colored lights. Then the house lights brighten and the stage is revealed to be the interior courtyard of the Holy Temple of Jerusalem. King Solomon sits on a throne. Beside him stands a flamboyantly ugly demon, Ashmedai)

King Solomon

And what have we here?

(Ashmedai cautiously approaches the two recumbent men. He sniffs the air over Kossabone, grimacing.)

Ashmedai

This one, my king, has apparently been dead for quite some time...

(Yonnondio and Kossabone uncover their heads and look up: all four are equally startled.)

King Solomon

Rather rambunctious for a corpse... Speak you! Who are you?

Yonnondio

My God... You have heard my prayer before it left my lips and have honored it with a vision of your Holiness... We are dead, Kossabone. No one sees God's face without being dead...

Kossabone

Dead? And that other one?

Yonnondio

Why, that is the face of the Tempter, himself! Until this moment, although I believed in God, I thought the Devil was a superstition, a bogey-man dreamed up by parents to set upon their wayward children...

King Solomon

By the Lord Almighty, I have asked you a question and you will answer me!

(Mystical music floods the Temple. The night sky has become a swirl of rotating light fringed with stars and nebulae plunging into its center)

Ashmedai

They seem afraid.

Kossabone

Ha! Afraid! Surely you jest...

Yonnondio

My name is Yonnondio, God. Surely you must have it recorded somewhere...

King Solomon

God? You think I'm God?

Yonnondio

Who else would you be? My friend, Kossabone, and I are dead and you are God come with the Devil to judge us.

(Both King Solomon and Ashmedai grin.)

King Solomon

He thinks you're the Devil!

Ashmedai

He thinks you're God!

King Solomon

No more blaspheming... I am not God. I am King Solomon, son of King David of the Hebrew tribes, builder of the Holy Temple. Ashmedai, introduce yourself.

Ashmedai

I am the king's... personal secretary.

King Solomon

What he means is that he has been loaned to me by God to assist me in discovering the nature of the universe. He may not be pretty but he's no Devil.

Ashmedai

Beauty, as you know, my king, is always in the eye of the beholder...

King Solomon

Indeed. Thank you for that lesson in aesthetics. I am, however, somewhat acquainted with what are generally considered the attributes of beauty. While I grant you that some of my dalliances represent purely political alliances with otherwise predatory and barbaric nations, I must point out that, of 300 wives and 700 concubines, I do have some reckoning of what is considered beautiful...

Yonnondio

Listen! No more explosions... Ah, Kossabone, how blessed is the silence of death...!

King Solomon

Stop your talk of death! I'm the one who has traveled through mystic paths beyond the world you touch and feel and smell...

Ashmedai

(Sniffing Kossabone from a distance)

Indeed...

King Solomon

...in order to arrive at this place. Neither of you fools is dead, so get used to that fact. Though, I agree, Ashmedai, that trembling one has the stink of death around him... You there, strange fellow: is your foulness part and parcel of your being...?

Kossabone

(Gazing nervously from the floor)

King...Solomon? You say you are...King Solomon? How can that be...?

Yonnondio

His bowels gave out from the bombing, O King. It is a known phenomenon among those of us who were not born to be warriors...King Solomon, you say? Are you then the guardian of Heaven? Is it to your wisdom that we must submit our souls?

King Solomon

O spare me your inanities... Have you no ears? I am not the guardian of Heaven for that is the purview of Mikhael, the Archangel...

Ashmedai

And Messiah. Don't forget Messiah.

King Solomon

(Testily)

And Messiah. And Behemoth and Leviathan in the last days. And the ziz... Do you understand?
You aren't dead. You both are the misbegotten souls you've been from birth: I, on the other
hand, have journeyed here during one of my conjurations, seeking supernatural wisdom...

Ashmedai

An unexpected and, I might add, a most disagreeable way-station on our journey, burdened with
the two of you...

Kossabone

I understand now, Yonnondio. Ha ha! I see all and know all...now! We've been driven mad, both
of us, by that insufferable war... we are no longer connected to our world through our reasoning
faculties... Ha ha! Such freedom! Such delight!

Ashmedai

And on and on... insufferable. Gentlemen: you are not mad! Let that be the end of it. Stupid,
perhaps, but not mad. There.

King Solomon

(to Ashmedai)

Have you any inkling where you've brought me?

Ashmedai
(to Yonnondio)

You there! The one who doesn't stink: where are we?

Yonnondio
(looking around, bewildered)

By God, a minute ago I could answer that. Now... I ... I'm confused. I can't say for sure...

Kossabone

The Temple Mount...

Ashmedai

The Temple Mount? Good, we're on target... My compliments to your necromantic artistry, O king.

King Solomon

Thank you. You are aware, of course, that I built this Temple. It seems to have survived well over the years.

Yonnondio

(looking around, astounded)

Why, not a minute ago this Temple Mount was a desolate waste... The Temple you built was destroyed by the Babylonians thousands of years ago. the Second Temple was destroyed by the Romans. And the Third Temple was destroyed only this week...my friend and I were hiding in the rubble...

King Solomon

(to Ashmedai)

Then what is all this? (indicating pillars and other structures intact)

Ashmedai

A king should never travel far from his throne...

King Solomon

The Temple is God's House, not mine. I hope you are not deliberately trying to distort or confuse the very facts I am attempting to discover with your "help."

Ashmedai

I have no such intention... I helped bring you where you wanted to be brought. I had no idea what we would find: neither war nor peace, destruction nor fullness, [indicating Yonnondio and Kossabone] madmen nor angels... I simply serve you as you wish.

King Solomon

When I asked only wisdom of God, He gave me wisdom, wealth and long life. I have received His dispensation to learn the nature of the universe, which is why we have journeyed - through my slave's tutelage - to this place. Once again, God has shown His generosity as well as His penchant for the mysterious. Have you any idea why He might have wanted to bring us together?

Yonnondio

You have arrived in troubled times. It might well be the Last Days for all the fighting and the blood that has soaked the stones and desert sands. My friend and I have been of two minds: to fruitlessly serve to protect the fallen Temple from marauders until we are killed as well; or to run from here as fast as we can before madness or death overtake us... And now you have appeared in our darkest hour...

Kossabone

Speak for yourself, Yonnondio...I came here only to hide among the fallen stones... I am a wretch and a fool and ... a coward. I have soiled myself with my fear and will never be clean again...

Ashmedai

Again, that whining... leave us, mortal, and clean yourself before returning.

King Solomon

Indeed.

(With evident difficulty, Kossabone departs)

Yonnondio

Well, I'll just see to my friend...

King Solomon

Stay. I have questions to put to you. All this carnage and violence: I have, as you might imagine, a particular interest in understanding what has occurred. Can you explain?

Yonnondio

You want explanations from me? King Solomon, I haven't the power to search that deeply into the human heart. My comrade and I were caught up in the factionalism of a bloody religious war and were not faring well, I might add...You saw what happened to poor Kossabone: I wasn't far from that, myself...

King Solomon

And the basis for this factionalism?

Yonnondio

Ha! Kossabone would have it that it is simply the end of the world, the time of troubles that represents the working out of God's will. Who knows? My honest opinion that it's over money... all over money. The people with the most money want their own way. The people with no money turn to savage tyrants for leadership, tyrants as disagreeable as the know-it-alls with all the money. As you well know, this part of the world seems to breed mania and dissension: it is a product of the sun's heat reflected off our peculiar ring of mountains, I think... but I am a fool, a clown, a man who all his life has merely swelled the crowd with his anonymous presence: what do I know? But there we were, cowering among the ruins, awaiting death, when you suddenly appeared.

Ashmedai

Those lights and explosions we heard when first we appeared: what were they?

Yonnondio

Bombs.

King Solomon

What are bombs?

Yonnondio

Weapons of war. We don't all carry the power of the Red Sea within us, to drown our enemies in one fell swoop. So we use bombs. We drop them on each other from great heights or propel them across long distances and hope that when they explode they kill as many people as possible.

King Solomon

(looking at Ashmedai)

Remarkable... Such fools as these control such violent forces.

Yonnondio

Ah, but King Solomon, isn't that the beauty of it? The sublime paradox: that the greater fools we are, the more powerful and numerous are our bombs.

King Solomon

And where are these bombs now?

Yonnondio

Perhaps a lull in the fighting...? Perhaps, because you appeared and God wishes to honor you, the rest of the world has been transformed... for the moment. When you leave, I'll find myself a new rock to crawl beneath. (Looks up at the sky. A great swirl of galactic lights and colors appears.) Look! Have you ever seen anything like that?

(Both Solomon and Ashmedai look up, perplexed)

King Solomon

I see nothing.

Yonnondio

What? Open your eyes wider, King. You've never slept under a sky like that, I'll bet: it is as if the canopy of the heavens was torn apart and... and another realm of light and glory were revealed...

Ashmedai

(making dubious signs to Solomon)

My lord, I see nothing, either.

King Solomon

The Great Architect of the Universe commands many mysteries.

Ashmedai

Thus have you made me bring you here: to unravel them.

King Solomon

Help me to see what this fellow sees, slave.

Ashmedai

I don't think that is God's will...

King Solomon

Again, you'd argue with me...! It is God's will that I increase in wisdom that I might in my own mind and heart glorify His creation in all its splendor. Now, make me see!

Ashmedai

(Gesturing, incantations)

Well?

King Solomon

I see nothing but the night...

Ashmedai

As I suspected. The fellow is mad.

Yonnondio

I won't quarrel with you there, King.

King Solomon

Mad... When I first conceived to conjure you, slave, I kept my plans to myself for fear of being thought mad. Indeed, until you first appeared I feared I was, indeed, mad, and that my mind's vision of God's will, the flux and flow of inspiration and enlightenment that poured through my brain night and day were nothing more than madness. And, perhaps in other men, such, indeed, is madness. But my pact was with God and at His request I chose wisdom from among all things as a gift. I knew, of course, that, through wisdom, all things else would accrue: wealth, power...happiness. Yes, happiness. (Wistful) I was, I'm afraid, wrong in that regard. Happiness. I tell myself that I'm not yet wise enough, that, as soon as I know all things, I'll be happy.

Ashmedai

And don't you rejoice among the wonders to which I've exposed you?

King Solomon

There is the thrill of discovery, to be sure. To have the root of a mystery suddenly laid bare before my eyes... yes, that is a visceral delight. But no sooner is that delight mulled over and digested than a new quandary presents itself and new mysteries, hidden behind the old, emerge. It is as if with every tearing of every veil God changes the nature of His being, leaving me no closer to seeing His face and spelling out the mysteries of His mind. The fact this fellow, there, can see a rent in the fabric of the night and I cannot provokes me to despair...

Ashmedai

But he is mad...

King Solomon

And did I not think myself mad when I first laid eyes on you? The horror of it... The litany of Hiram's misgivings, and those of Abijah, who saw in me one who step-by-step was drifting past the bounds established between God and man, driven by arrogance and a thoughtless striving for the very fruit that caused our first parents' fall from grace...All their somber words and anguished looks fell upon my mind when you appeared and for the first brief moments of our acquaintance I was an automaton, a golem, rigid, mindless, frozen with doubt... And then I remembered my pact with God and realized that, with wisdom comes the sacrifice of innocence, just as when the fledgling archer, after months of diligent practice and training, no longer marvels at the feats of his skilled colleague in quite the same way, will, in fact, never be able to marvel as the child does when shown a skilled bowman's miracles... It was my innocence I felt being stripped from me which I could go on and call madness or evil or trespass: I, however, chose to let it go, to fall from my eyes and heart like an old, soiled cloak...

Ashmedai

We spoke of many mysteries back then, my king. Hiram and Abijah believed I was your prisoner, held by bonds of amulet and incantation: they had no idea I served you for love of God at His command.

(He looks at Yonnondio enraptured at the vision of the sky.)

They saw only the secret chambers in the Temple, heard only the gossip among your wives with their foreign gods, felt my presence only in the troubled glare of your face after you had confronted wonders. Ha! They wouldn't let you drink a glass of wine or yearn for a woman after that without shaking their heads and mourning your fall from God's grace.

King Solomon

Would that I knew for certain that they were wrong...

(Suddenly addressing Yonnondio)

You. My slave and I wish to converse in private. Go join your friend.

(Yonnondio continues to stare at the sky then shakes his head, shrugs, and makes his way out of the Temple)

Yonnondio

(muttering)

OK, then... what do I care... no answers, anyway... anything you tell me I'm forced to accept because yes I've gone mad, or I'm dead... no doubt of that now... it doesn't really matter, then, what you say...

(End scene 1)

(Scene 2: Ashmedai and King Solomon in the Temple courtyard)

King Solomon

The year?

Ashmedai

The far future.

King Solomon

This place is...?

Ashmedai

The third Temple.

King Solomon

Third?

Ashmedai

The one you built with Hiram was destroyed by the Babylonians who proceeded to relocate your people to Babylon.

King Solomon

Relocate?

Ashmedai

Forced migration. Very traumatic for your people. Without a Temple they could no longer adhere to the rites and cultural hierarchies outlined in the Torah. They were as a flock of sheep uprooted into a strange land and beholden to strange masters, preyed upon by the wolves of strange faiths and alien ways.

King Solomon

How could that happen? I am making my people a mighty nation, honored throughout the world.

Ashmedai

Their might will be as smoke, their honor as old parchment rubbed with many writings, many erasures. After your death, the kingdom will be sundered. The lavishness of your dwelling will be matched by the weariness of your people's spirit.

King Solomon

But a second Temple is built...

Ashmedai

At the behest of prophets, by the hands of zealots. When Babylon falls to Persia, those who care to are allowed to return to Israel and rebuild. It takes half a millennium this time, but it falls again to a martial nation called the Romans. It takes more than two millennia for this third Temple to be rebuilt and it is destroyed not long thereafter. Look around you: warfare, fools, madmen...

King Solomon

(somberly)

My shame is great...

Ashmedai

This third Temple was like a palm tree planted in the desert, far from irrigating waters. It was built with money and pride, not the emoluments of the spirit. How soon it fell...

King Solomon

Can I bear this burden...?

Ashmedai

That you didn't resolve your people's problems for all time? If that's what you expected, then your arrogance surpasses legend. Why, therefore, do you use me to probe God's mysteries?

King Solomon

My pact with God...

Ashmedai

Your talk about that pact is tiresome. Yes, God has agreed to make you wise and has allowed you to recruit me to facilitate the process. But can you claim to know what lies behind your relationship with God? Has He given you me but to tempt you further toward sin and arrogance? Or has He embarked upon a method of teaching you the limitations of that much-vaunted attribute called wisdom? Perhaps you are now like Abraham, knife upraised above his beloved son, and God is watching you to see just what you will do...

King Solomon

(meditatively)

Yes, yes: I can see that now. Astounding... And the Prophets I demanded to speak with?

Ashmedai

They were to have met us here upon the Temple Mount.

King Solomon

What? We've met only those two clowns: where are Elijah and Jonah?

Ashmedai

Don't judge rashly; things may not be what they seem.

King Solomon

How so?

Ashmedai

The ways of God are mysterious. He means for us to puzzle out the nature of reality for ourselves. He will provide clue after clue and then, when you think you've got the key in hand to unlock all mysteries, the game shifts to a new level of play and you are left groping still, bewildered, ill at ease. Those "clowns" as you call them could very well be incarnations of the two Prophets for all we know. Or you and I have had our souls transposed with theirs and we are they. Or they are still on their way. Or any one of a thousand scenarios beyond our reckoning. Rest assured, though: God's will is always fulfilled.

King Solomon

The Temple three times destroyed... nothing left of me in all this... nothing... thousands of years and we are still at each others throats, and madmen are prophets... You call this God's will, slave?

Ashmedai

Tell me, then, what isn't God's will.

King Solomon

Demon, I've summoned you to answer my questions, not pose more riddles. Why ordain a Temple built to house one's Essence only to see it destroyed at the whim of armies?

Ashmedai

Puzzling, isn't it? Could God be more interested in how people behave toward His Temple than in seeing that the Temple - a place of stones and glass and metals, after all - survives as a monument to His glory? In any case, God has enabled you to conjure me and bring me to your side from the place of my birth and call me slave and make me do your bidding: isn't that sufficient proof of His power?

King Solomon

I never doubted His power...

Ashmedai

Of course not. You simply question His wisdom. You, the king whose wisdom fell upon him from the fingernail of that same God...

King Solomon

I want to know! I simply want to understand!

Ashmedai
(cavalierly)

That's why I'm here. You desired to look into the far future and encounter the Prophets Elijah and Jonah. Only you and God know why: it's not my place to ask. But we are here...

King Solomon

This is madness. I am dizzy with confusion...

Ashmedai

As you were when you were a child?

King Solomon

What do you know of my childhood?

Ashmedai

I watched you laying still among your father's flocks, listening to him play his harp and sing, stealing precious moments from his round of kingly duties... You, however, imagined yourself dead, silent and at peace with the realm beyond life, soothed into quiet ecstasy by the music... You felt there was more beyond this world, the same realm your father sought with song: but you could approach only through a child's silence and surrender.

(Solomon lapse into a trance of memory)

You wished only to walk into that other world that spoke so deeply to your father, King David, and gave him his poetry and song... You surrendered to death in those moments, joyfully, blissfully, attaining fleeting glimpses of that state of no desire, no fear; a state of static sublimity. That is, until your father made it known how greatly you would be king, how he decried a shepherd's life for you and shepherd's music and shepherd's morality...

King Solomon

Father! Father!

(Ashmedai backs off and from the mists of memory the ghost of King David appears)

King David

Solomon, my son... my son...

(Solomon prostrates himself before the ghost)

You're fooling around now with devils?

King Solomon

Father, I'm seeking wisdom...

King David

(looking disdainfully at Ashmedai in the shadows)

I paid tutors to give you wisdom: philosophers, statesmen, scientists, mathematicians from all over the world, the best that money could buy. And I had Abijah follow you around, watching your every move. And it comes to this...

King Solomon

I grew sick to death of that kind of knowledge... Yes, father, I grew well-versed in the wearying ways of the world, I achieved all that you wanted of me: no, I exceeded your expectations... My power and my wealth have become the stuff of legend...

King David

So you turn to demons to keep life interesting, eh?

King Solomon

I turn to God, Father! I bent my soul to Him that I could renew a passion in my heart for being alive. In spite of all your troubles, in spite of your good intentions and.. and the treachery within your own palace...

King David

Do not speak of him!!

(They fall silent, briefly)

King Solomon

I didn't mean to open old wounds... My point was that in spite of all your sorrows, you were given by God the gift of song and poetry. I had no such gift nor did it seem meant for me to ask for it when I had the chance... I asked for wisdom, instead, and I stand by my choice, though my life be filled with awesome wonders and tribulations as was yours...

King David
(lost in old grief)

Do not speak of him... my beautiful son, my young warrior,
as gracious as moonlight, as bewitching as Sabine wine...
Absalom, you tore my heart from my chest and my tongue from between my lips,
forcing me to witness your death from vanity.
I would have granted the most leprous slave
in my kingdom my throne, my honors,
my royal cask of derelict pleasures,
if I could only have died before you...
Absalom, who I could not but cherish
in spite of who you became as you grew up,
flaunting your hatred of me throughout my palace
and in my very face...
No: do not speak of him.
Pass on to other matters,
matters of state and economy,
the harvest and the price of grain...

(King David stares vacantly)

King Solomon
(to Ashmedai)

He doesn't know me...

(Ashmedai enters slowly from the shadows)

Ashmedai

His soul is fractured like wanton crystal: that is the price one pays, I suppose, when one's only gifts from God are music and poetry. A shattering of the soul seems inevitable, given the ways of the world.

King Solomon

He fades away...! (King David's ghost disappears) There was no way I could have made up for his loss, no matter what I did. I guess I knew that all along and that was what propelled my youth toward the stasis of that other world... Wisdom was easier to ask for, Ashmedai, than a father's love. Come now. I must have you continue to make me wise.

Ashmedai

I am at your service...

(stage darkens: end scene 2)

(Scene 3: the Temple courtyard, in ruins. Yonnondio and Kossabone sheltering in each other's arms beside a column half blown apart. The sky is dark and silent.)

Yonnondio

There, there, Kossabone. We will survive.

Kossabone

I'm terribly ashamed...

Yonnondio

You're clean now. Forget it.

Kossabone

I'm soiled outside and in, malignant to the core.

Yonnondio

No, not at all. You just think you are, but you're wrong: let it go.

Kossabone

Thank you, Yonnondio, for your faith in me. I wish I had your strength.

Yonnondio

And I wish I had your innocence...

Kossabone

I'm getting hungry.

Yonnondio

Ah, good. That means you're getting better.

Kossabone

But how dare I think of eating when the Temple is in ruins?

Yonnondio

God in His wisdom did not choose to make us like the plants so that we could live on sunlight. He built us with cavities and orifices that are vacant when emptied and must be filled...Therefore, you're hungry in spite of the destruction of the Temple: a fact of life.

Kossabone

I'm not fond of such facts.

Yonnondio

Nor I. I'm sorry we were not made like plants so we would never have to kill to eat. Why, even eating plants is an act of destruction: if for pity of brute beasts you eat only plants, still do you murder the innocent. We are forced by our nature into dark and sordid ways.

Kossabone

Don't you wonder, Yonnondio, if somewhere out among the stars there might not live a race of men made beautiful as plants who are at peace with themselves and all the living things of their world...?

Yonnondio

You describe Eden. Man and woman, designed as they are, were placed there, I'm afraid, erroneously: they were never worthy of such munificence. They were like children sent to live in a great temple or library, heedless of worshipful doctrines or lacking the ability to read. It was not our fault, Kossabone.

Kossabone

Our fault?

Yonnondio

I mean, their fault...

Kossabone

Oh. (He stands and wrings water from his shirt.) I must find a change of clothes.

Yonnondio

The smell's gone. Don't worry about it.

Kossabone

It's not gone. You're just used to it.

Yonnondio

The human condition... I suppose I would have us stop being human for awhile and rise above ourselves. If, for example, I could transfer all my thoughts and feelings and perceptions into the body of a robot that never had to eat or feel pain or defecate... You know, I could rebuild the Temple without stopping for rest or food, even with bombs falling. I would simply keep on working, absolutely unafraid of anything.

Kossabone

But why would you?

Yonnondio

Why?

Kossabone

Yes... why? Look around at all this: would it matter to a robot, even with the mind and heart of Yonnondio, that there's a fourth or fifth Temple? Obviously, it was never rebuilt within the hearts of men. Why pile up fresh stone?

Yonnondio

The Temple was worshipped and adored...

Kossabone

By some. And destroyed by others. Tell me truly, what's the point?

Yonnondio

Didn't you see that apparition of King Solomon and his monster-lackey?

Kossabone

Yes. So?

Yonnondio

Where else but in God's holy sanctuary could such things be seen?

Kossabone

O no, my friend: ghosts and goblins haunt the world...

Yonnondio

Perhaps some do: not King Solomon. We have witnessed a terrifying miracle in all this destruction. That can only come from holy ground. If I were a robot, I would already be re-sanctifying this Temple to the one and true God.

Kossabone

Well, have it your way: neither of us are robots today, however, and I'm feeling famished. We must find some food.

Yonnondio

The commandos are supposed to have kept stores somewhere nearby, maybe even hidden near the altar.

Kossabone

They wouldn't have...!

Yonnondio

Why not? What better place if here is where you are and here it is that you're hungry? Let's find out.

Kossabone

(suddenly reluctant)

They're inside...

Yonnondio

Hmm. I know.

Kossabone

Can you go back in?

Yonnondio

No, you're right. I can't go back.

(silence)

Kossabone

I can go back. I'm very hungry right now.

Yonnondio

Can you go back? Really?

Kossabone

I'm not sure...

Yonnondio

I don't even know what they are... what we saw...

Kossabone

Spirits.

Yonnondio

That tells me nothing. What are they really?

Kossabone

They're... spirits, that's all. And spirits won't fight me for bread. I'm going back to see if there's any food.

Yonnondio

I'll stay here...

Kossabone

(uncertain)

All right... I'll bring you back food if I find any.

Yonnondio

That's nice of you.

(Kossabone rises and heads into what's left of the Temple)

Wait, Kossabone!

(Kossabone turns and waits)

Be careful.

Kossabone

I will. (Turns to leave)

Yonnondio

Kossabone!

(Kossabone waits without turning)

I'll go with you. I'm hungry, too.

Kossabone

(smiling)

See? Hungry men are courageous men.

Yonnondio

Kossabone, my friend, hungry men walk with God, Himself...

(End scene 3)

(Scene 4: interior of Holy of Holies)

King Solomon

Give me a light! The eternal flame has long since gone out...

Ashmedai

(gesturing a flame into being)

War is, indeed, Hell.

King Solomon

Hell, you say? I'm surprised to hear that from one like you: we mortals, on the other hand, know Hell intimately. My father's command to build this Temple came from his broken-hearted and feeble attempt to avoid being sent to Hell for his sins.

Ashmedai

Don't sound so bitter. Your father shared the anxieties of many of your kind. I meant only that Hell, as I understand mortal beliefs in it, is a place of punishment for sinning against God. The eternal flame in this Temple, so harmless, so ethereal, was a target for fanatics, a justification for their making war: a symbol of their enemy's God and, thus, an enemy of their God...

King Solomon

(pauses while digging through wreckage to uncover what had been the Ark of the Covenant)

My, haven't we mortals populated the universe with one-true-Gods: that's why I had you bring us here. Help me move this rubble.

(Ashmedai gestures and, amidst creaks and groans from a flurry of little slave-demons who suddenly appear, a chunk of Temple pediment shifts and rolls away, revealing the Ark. The little demons disappear.)

Thank you. There, at last: you see it, don't you?

Ashmedai

Of course.

King Solomon

Look at its design: a little Temple within the Great Temple, guarded by Seraphs.

Ashmedai

A child within the womb of its parent... Too bad the parent fared so badly.

King Solomon

Yet the child lives... (struggles, opens the Ark) It's empty! Three times built, three times destroyed... and the kernel of God it contained is gone!

Ashmedai

Stolen?

King Solomon

By partisans, for safe-keeping... or by enemies, for a trophy... or... by fools thinking to profit from this thunderous war...Those two capering idiots we encountered: bring them here!

(Ashmedai raises his hand to make a magickal gesture but is stopped by an approaching commotion)

Kossabone

I need more light! I almost broke my legs tripping on this wreckage.

Yonnondio

Follow the glare within: the eternal flame must still be lit! Are you badly hurt?

Kossabone

A scratch, a scratch: nothing more. Painful, though. I'll barely be able to walk tomorrow.

Yonnondio

Well, that's no problem. We have nowhere to go.

Kossabone

True enough. Now, keep your eyes peeled for those... spirits. They're known to pounce on men who have fallen or have some way been disabled.

Yonnondio

Please, my friend, don't characterize things you know nothing about. They were visions and, as such, could perhaps have held some sort of message for us sent by God. We are, sadly, too modern to not be terrified by such close contact with the Great Architect of the Universe, in spite of our best intentions. Careful, now. Are you steady?

Kossabone

Yes, yes, fine.

Yonnondio

Good. I haven't seen anything of those... visions. They were a message, I tell you, or else we're both raving lunatics...

Kossabone

A message about what?

(King Solomon steps forward with a royal gesture)

King Solomon

Stop!

Kossabone

(falls to floor, covering his head)

My God...!

Yonnondio

You, again! And that monster...!

King Solomon

My servant... hardly a monster, though possibly lacking in that familiar symmetry we mortals
crave for our bed-partners...

(Ashmedai looks at King Solomon askance, somewhat offended. Solomon ignores him.)

Where is the Word of God?

Yonnondio

Excuse me?

King Solomon

You've stolen the contents of the Ark. I demand that you return them!

Yonnondio

I did no such thing! We were caught up in this war and of our own free will hastened here to
prevent just such an occurrence...!

Ashmedai

Good job you made of it.

King Solomon

You are an Israelite, then?

Yonnondio

No, not quite...

King Solomon

Then you are an enemy?

Yonnondio

Spirit, ghost, pale vision of ancient times: whatever you are, I don't quite know how to answer you.

King Solomon

Just speak the truth or my servant will slit your throat, tear the heart from your breast and feed your bowels to the vultures...

(Kossabone groans)

Yonnondio

Vision, ghost: I was never much concerned with God. I had no religion or rather, I should say, I believed in all religions. Any people among whom I passed whose thoughts of God brought smiles to their faces, well, I worshipped with them: or not, as the case may be. And if the thought of God brought fear into their eyes or the look of sorrow that comes with bearing a heavy burden over many years, I shut up about God and left them to themselves. Yes, there were some smiling Israelites I've known, as well as those of other faiths... Many more so than before this damned war. So, yes, I am one with them, but that is not all I am...

King Solomon
(softly to Ashmedai)

This one's not such a fool after all...

(sternly to Yonnondio who has sunk weakly to his knees)

Stand up, fellow, if you would have me believe you speak honorable words.

Yonnondio

I'm afraid my fear has gotten the better of me: my knees gave out. They shake too much. Do what you must, believe what you want: I can't stand up.

King Solomon

Then kneel. Sit. Do what you wish. I've no wish to torment you.

(All are silent. King Solomon strokes his beard, deep in thought. Ashmedai smiles cunningly at the two fallen men.)

Kossabone
(to Yonnondio)

Tell him he's doing a good job of what he has no wish to do...!

King Solomon

What? Speak up, coward. I will not address your buttocks!

Yonnondio

Ghost! Ghost! Have a care, ghost...! You've scared my friend until he has become what you see before you, a mass of jellied terror bursting from its sac. And, as for me, I thought you were nothing more than my own madness: but I was wrong. You speak the truth now: who and what are you, and why have you come to us among all the falling bombs!

(A great thunder of bombs shakes the foundation of the Temple and the world.)

King Solomon

Your kind wages war like the God of Israel: a mighty thunder!

Yonnondio

Then pity us, for that is all they do that is God-like.

King Solomon

Nothing else?

Yonnondio

O, they build and re-build Temples...

King Solomon

Hmmm. Know this then: I am Solomon, King of the Jews, son of David; I am he who built this Temple when it rose first upon this site. I did it without warfare but with honor and friendship, with stones unscored by iron that is used for war, and with a brotherhood of craftsmen who learned to build their souls as one who builds a house of worship. It burdens my heart to see this mad future... But my servant, Ashmedai, Lord of all Demons, has brought me here at my bidding that I might know the nature and fate of all things, and better understand the inscrutable workings of the Divine Mind. That my journeying might break my heart and shatter my spirit is the chance I have been willing to take.

(All are silent amidst the carnage.)

Kossabone

Yonnondio, tell the monster I want to go home. Tell him to use his magick and send us home.

Yonnondio

"The workings of the Divine Mind," you say? (To Kossabone) Calm down, my friend. I don't think they mean to hurt us, which is more than can be said for those armies outside. (To King Solomon) King Solomon, your Ashmedai there has aimed his arrow right: we stand upon the pivot of Heaven, the very spot where the invisible divine meets the sun-scorched solid, implacable, real world. Ashmedai, indeed, may have brought you here in time to see the end of the world.

(A thunderous explosion)

I fear you may be right: that all of this is truly "the workings of the Divine Mind"...

(Another explosion and flashes of light and the stage darkens. End scene 4.)

(Scene 5. Darkness. A voice is heard:)

Voice

I shall sing unto the lord
for He has triumphed gloriously:
horse and chariot He has hurled into the sea.

(King Solomon, bathed in light, rises from the floor as if from a deep sleep.)

King Solomon

Who's there? What voice is that?

Voice

You will bring them and plant them on the mount of Your inheritance,
the place, O Lord, which you chose for your dwelling or sanctuary;
Your dwelling, your sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands established...

King Solomon

Who is there that mocks me! Temple upon temple upon temple: ruined! Plundered! All is
plunged in darkness! My God, show me what manner of creature mocks me...!!

(Moses, staff in hand, steps out of darkness)

Moses

The Lord will reign forever and ever!

King Solomon

(astounded)

There can only be one man whose face beams with the light of God's presence: Moses!

(King Solomon falls to his knees)

Moses

Take off your sandals, Solomon. You kneel on sacred ground.

(Solomon takes off his sandals, keeping his eyes averted.)

The Lord has seen fit to bless you with many visions, for you are the exemplar of the world. It is through your eyes that all mankind will see the beginning and the end. It is through your eyes that all mankind will see the assembling and the unraveling, the sowing and the reaping.

King Solomon

My God! My God!

Moses

You kneel upon that sacred ground called by the Sages the North Point: it is that part of God's Work He left uncreated, unfathomable, in flux: it is where the blasphemers, flushed with their magick, are challenged by God to, indeed, create what was left uncreated and rival His majesty. All in the North Point is chaos and unpotentiated Substance.

(Moses raises his staff and a flux of lights whirls over all, galaxies crumble, merge, all of space surges like the currents of the sea.)

King Solomon

(weakly)

I am no blasphemer...

Moses

You would have knowledge beyond the knowledge of men: once gotten, who is to say that you would not desire knowledge equivalent to that of El Shaddai, the Great Lord, Himself? Did not our ancestors, Eve and Adam, seek such wisdom?

King Solomon

No blasphemer... No blasphemer...

Moses

Then behold the stuff of God's Creation...!!

(Flashes of light, swirls, thunder: in its midst, though like a vague shadow, Ashmedai can be seen striking the rhythmic postures of the dance of time and space. A triangle with the Divine Eye in its center swirls around and around. Solomon collapses on the floor. Stage darkens. End scene 5.)

(Scene 6. The wreckage of the Temple. Yonnondio and Kossabone huddle together, alone.)

Kossabone

We are dead... we are dead... we are dead... yes, (rises, paces madly, limping) I must catalogue my sins: I have dishonored my father and mother by growing up a fool: yes, yes: I have killed no one with my hands but many thousands in my heart: yes, yes: I see them all now, those cloying sins: I have not given love in kind for what I have received: yes, yes: they're rising all around me now, little dark demons: I have turned my back on the poor and needy by allowing myself to be one of them; ye, that's it, that's it: Yonnondio, even for us who are dead, confession tastes good on the tongue...

Yonnondio

(jumps to his feet and stops Kossabone)

Shut up...!! My friend...

Kossabone

(still frantic)

More! So many more... I have believed in none of God's faces by believing in all of them...

Yonnondio

(strikes Kossabone)

Stop!! I will not be alone here with a madman... Or I shall go mad, too... And where will that get us...?

Kossabone

(rubbing where he has been hit)

Then we'll both be mad... What does it matter? It is, after all, the end of the world...

Yonnondio

If that's so, they say the Messiah will appear. I will not have Him find me frothing at the mouth.
Nor you. Get a grip on yourself.

Kossabone

O Yonnondio: I am such a sniveling coward...

Yonnondio

Be glad God made you thus... You never had the capacity to serve as a hero. Had you been brave, you would long since have been dead. (Tenderly) Then where would I have been without you? Good: that's right, you're calming down. We are both still alive and, for what it's worth, relatively unharmed, except perhaps in our brains.

(Looks around)

Unharmed and unhaunted. The ghosts are gone.

Kossabone

Really? (Looks around) Yes, they're gone. As if they never were...

Yonnondio

O don't kid yourself: they were.

Kossabone

No, they were not: just more of my stupid fancies. (Laughs madly) And I dragged you down with me, my poor, dear friend: you love me so much that you, too, saw them out of sympathy for my distress: confess it.

Yonnondio

They were here. Trust me. I don't love you that much...

Kossabone

Then where are they now?

Yonnondio

How should I know? They disappeared just as they appeared: without leaving me a note.

Perhaps they will appear again. We must leave this place. The stones and soil and the very air are too heavy with righteousness and desecration for two mortal fools like us...

Kossabone

Yes... yes, you're right. Let's leave...

Yonnondio

No, no... wait... (frozen, listening) We must stay.

Kossabone

What! Why?

Yonnondio

Listen... Can't you hear that voice?

Kossabone

What voice? I hear nothing.

Yonnondio

Shut up, then! Yes... I'm listening...

(Voice resonates throughout hall)

Voice

I am the spirit of Hiram Abif:

I built this Temple when it was the morning of the world,
long before I laid hands upon the cedars of Lebanon
and the rare, quarried marble and the precious metals
and gems of later days.

I built this Temple when the souls of men
were freshly fashioned by the hand of God
and the walls were Torah
and the porticoes Torah
and the Holy of Holies likewise Torah.

My master, the soul that would be Solomon,
directed my handiwork at God's behest
and he taught me to build my own soul
in the same righteous proportions
as God's holy shrine.

The building of the one,
as template for the later solid stuff of the world,
went hand-in-hand with the building of the other...

Kossabone

Yonnondio, you frighten me! I just started calming down and now you go crazy...!

Yonnondio

Shut up!... Speak again!

(Kossabone is thoroughly confused: he opens his mouth to speak again but Yonnondio covers it with his hand. A vague presence approaches the pair downstage.)

Voice

You have seen Solomon's soul:

now it is in torment.

He used the gift of wisdom to bad purpose,

losing himself in the things of this world

while clutching for their essence in the domain of ghosts.

Seven years I labored on the Holy Temple,

yet thirteen years he had me work on his palace.

He bound nation to nation through the spurious ties of marriage

and the marriage-bed,

and not through bonds of decency, love and worship

of our common God and our common Heart...

At this very moment he wrestles with the Dark Angel

sent by God to further try his soul,

to bring him to that greater light

before he irrevocably falls...

Yonnondio

But isn't that the course of wisdom: to seek and falter and strive at all times for perfection in spite of our human frailty...?

Voice

He will be given what he seeks;
your words advocated for him and have been heard.
Know you now that the world is to be resolved
into its primal stuff,
the very thought within God's Mind...
the Patriarchs begin to descend from Heaven...

Yonnondio

And the Messiah? Is He to come? Now? Today?

Voice

This very hour...

(Hiram Abif emerges from darkness.)

Yonnondio

Messiah!!

Hiram

Not yet, but quickly now...

(Hiram approaches an astounded Kossabone who still cannot see or hear him. He grips his right arm by the wrist, startling Kossabone, making him fall in a faint on the floor, then raising him to his feet, entranced.)

Kossabone

I had no inkling of time's passage:
Deep in the stinking belly of the beast
my heart churned in horror and I knew,
for the very first time, the might and mystery of God.
In that monster's bowels I smelled the rotting flesh
of all God's martyrs: all who were burned or starved or worked
to death or suffocated in gas chambers or torn apart
by wild beasts or sudden blasts of bombs: I smelled their deaths
and saw them die with my mind's eye, all of them, one
after another, as I lay churning in the belly of the beast.
And then I was retched ashore, the stench of all that death
relentless in my nostrils; and I preached God's Word
to the people of Nineveh and brought salvation to them
which I, in my wicked anger, had tried so desperately
to withhold. And know this, Traveling Man,
that, once again, my soul will enter the belly of the great whale,
willingly, bringing with it all men's souls:
to share their pain, to help each make peace
with its Maker, the Great Architect of the Universe.

(Kossabone pulls away from Hiram and falls to the floor. Hiram approaches Yonnondio, hand
outstretched.)

Hiram

Give me your hand...

(Yonnondio takes his hand and falls into a trance)

Welcome, Blessed Prophet!

Yonnondio

(marveling and joyous)

Yes, the Shekinah descends and the Messiah follows after,

and no more will I be compelled to roam this world

and look upon the indignities of poverty,

the dissolution of disease and madness,

the barbarities of lust and greed and cruelty:

I was the bulwark of the poor and weak...

I was the beggar that rich men spat upon...

I was the naked waif raped and tortured in the dark...

I was the leper and the cripple, the man shunned by all:

I noted down the enormity of each man's sacrilege

and now, returned unto this vessel of flesh,

I will be drawn aloft, my heart brimming with mankind's sorrows

and mankind's relentless love...

I welcome God's Bride, the Shekinah,

and I welcome the Messiah, descending...

descending...

(Stage darkens. End scene 6.)

(Scene 7. King Solomon, grown old and weary, sits enthroned among his courtiers.)

King Solomon

My Lords and Councilors: in the days of my wandering after God's Word,

when my heart was woefully full of unrequited love

and I sought my joy in hidden and occult matters,

you know how this land was ruled by a mystic shade,

a being in form and word and voice like me,

but born of magick and vapors: and then,

when I returned from my traveling, I retreated

into the seclusion of my royal chambers and gave up all

pretense of kingly virtues. No, don't protest:

do me the honor in my last days

to respect my speaking hard-won truths:

there will be no kingdom after I die;

there will be civil war, dissension, destruction, exile;

thus will progress all human history...

I had hoped that the gift of wisdom would be enough to break

this earthly chain of woe; but I have seen the workings of the universe,

the raw stuff of which only God's hand can craft and mold

a world... and I will, in these my last days,

dictate a testament as profound and disturbing

as the glorious visions I have seen... come forth,

scribe, and write this down, write this down:

"Vanity of vanities,

all is vanity..."

(Stage darkens.)

END